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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 001448

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/22/2011

TAGS: PGOV PINR PINS NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: ETHNIC CLASHES IN NASARAWA STATE:  
CONFLICT OVER LAND AND COMMUNITY STATUS

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter, reason 1.5 (B/D).

¶1. (U) Summary. Ethnic clashes in the Middle-Belt State of Nasarawa highlight long-standing and bitter disputes over land and community status. "Settlers" and indigenes trade reprisal raids, burning homes, seizing property, and taking lives. The State Government struggles to effect dialogue between the affected communities, and relative peace appears to have been re-established after security forces intervened. End summary.

¶2. (U) Local press reported June 22 violent clashes between rival ethnic groups in the south-east corner of Nasarawa State, a Middle-Belt State located immediately to the east of the Federal Capital Territory. One report listed 10 killed in clashes near the town of Azara over the past few days between ethnic Tiv communities and Hausa-speaking inhabitants. Poloff spoke by telephone with Nasarawa Deputy Governor Onje Gye-Wado June 22, and received an update on the conflict and the State Government's efforts to calm the situation.

¶3. (C) Gye-Wado told Poloff that, in an area long unsettled by tensions between rival ethnic groups in the south-eastern corner of the state, the latest round of attacks and reprisals began in March with the murder of a Kwala community leader. Gye-Wado spoke of a four-way contest between the Tiv, the Kwala, Hausa-speaking peoples originally from Borno State (located to the north), and Jukun communities. The Deputy Governor had no exact figures at hand, but he said that "quite a few" people had lost their lives over the last three months in repeated raids by the four groups on each other's communities, the burning of homes, and looting of property. The root causes of the conflict were access to land, and the relative status of the various communities vis-a-vis the others. "It is a very tricky situation," said Gye-Wado. "Everyone is always talking of "settlers," and how they must leave the area." Each ethnic group (aside from the Hausa-speakers) made some claim to being indigenes, with the others categorized as interlopers (and hence of low status). Many people had fled the area in the past two weeks, he said, in particular Tiv peoples crossing into Benue State to the south (which is a majority Tiv state).

¶4. (C) Gye-Dado said that violence sprang up again last week after the murder of a community leader among the Hausa-speakers. In one unfortunate incident this week, he said, six rioters were killed by police, with one policeman killed in the melee. Beefed-up security forces had basically restored order, he said, but beyond the immediate intervention of security forces, his government had spent much time and effort on consultative measures with and among the four communities. The Nasarawa Government had also worked intensively with the Benue Government to discuss lessening of tensions and joint security measures, he said. These efforts had borne fruit, and, for now, at least, a relative calm had returned to the area. People had begun to return to their homes. Although he offered no predictions, the Deputy Governor said he hoped that dialogue and consultation would prevail, and the rounds of reprisal attacks cease.

¶5. (C) Comment. Bitter disputes over land and community status bedevil many States in Nigeria. Tiv, Jukun, Kwala and Hausa-speakers live intermingled in this section of Nasarawa State and disputes tend to fester for months if not years. The Nawarawa Government appears to understand the importance of dialogue and consultation. But localized disputes such as this will continue among impoverished communities where land and status are acutely coveted and jealously guarded. End Comment.  
Jeter